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Sermon for Pentecost 19
October 16, 2022

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22–30

²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

It doesn't take us long to discover – if we're paying attention – that life in this world involves one wrestling match after another. Whether it's with a sinful heart or heart disease, with a beloved child or dreaded foe, with the temptations of Satan or with God Himself, it seems we're always wrestling with something or someone. Today we'll consider three cases in which people have wrestled with God.

1. Jacob

The first of these is Jacob. In today's Old Testament, Jacob is on an exodus journey. He's going out from his family in Laban's land, heading toward the Promised Land and to Esau, his brother. He's afraid of what lies ahead, for he had, in his younger days, stolen the inheritance that belonged to Esau, as well as the blessing of his father that should have been spoken to Esau. When Jacob received news that his brother was coming to meet him, he gathered together his family and his great herds and flocks, taking every precaution, as he approached the inevitable wrath he would soon come to face.

The night before this encounter, Jacob was restless because of what had taken place twenty years before. Time does not take away guilt; Esau is coming. Is he looking for his day of vengeance? Jacob imagines various scenarios and mulls over what he might say to his brother. His conscience rises up and accuses him: Jacob the Supplanter, Jacob the Trickster, Jacob the Deceiver. Esau is coming; is it even possible that his brother might have forgotten about the inheritance and the blessing? Not a chance. The Promised Land



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is ahead, but Jacob's sin and his ever-increasing burden of guilt prevent him from entering it.

He wants to be alone, maybe so he can have a few hours of peace. He crosses the stream called Jabbok, but peaceful rest eludes him. Away from his family and his earthly possessions, he finds that his sin has not only separated him from his brother, his family, and the Promised Land, but from God's gracious presence as well. The night is black and except for the chirping of crickets and the non-corporeal companions of his twenty-year-old sin, his burdensome guilt, and his ever-increasing fear, he is completely and utterly alone.

But not for long. God arrives on the scene. He is incarnate and as a Man he comes to contend with Jacob. They begin an epic wrestling match and Jacob doesn't realize who his opponent is. As the sinner grapples with almighty God, God permits him to wrestle with Him throughout the night. And sometime during the match Jacob realizes that he's not struggling with mere flesh and blood, and suddenly, God reaches out His finger and puts Jacob's thigh out of joint. There is instant and continuous pain. Jacob hops around and, in spite of his pain and suffering, with strength and perseverance that can only come from above, he determines not to release his hold on God until he has God's blessing.

I don't know what kind of wrestling moves were used in this match; they might have gone something like this:

"You have sinned."

"Yes, but you don't desire the death of a sinner. I hold You to that."

"I am the God of justice and you are guilty as charged."

"Yes, but You are the God of mercy and I know You will not give me what I deserve. You have promised and I cling to Your Word."

"You deserve nothing but eternal separation from Me."

"Yes, but You are a gracious God, providing a substitute for my father Isaac on Mount Moriah. I won't let go of You until I hear Your Word of blessing."

Then the Word of the Lord came to the man whose name meant supplanter, deceiver: "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked Him, "Tell me Your name, I pray." But He said: "Why is it that you ask My name?" And then He blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying: "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." From that day, we're told, Jacob walked with a limp because of his thigh.

Could God have won that match at any point? Absolutely. No mortal has a ghost of a chance if God wants to reach out in His Divine, omnipotent justice. Why, then, didn't He? Why did the Lord let the wrestling match go on all night? Why did He engage in this match to begin with? Why did He allow Jacob to prevail in the end? Why did God inflict a painful injury that dogged Jacob for the rest of his life? There are at least four reasons for all of this: first, so that Jacob's sin could be forgiven; second, so that Jacob's guilt could



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be taken away; third, so that servile fear could be replaced by godly fear; and fourth, so Jacob could hobble into the Promised Land.

2. Jesus

Jesus was on a similar exodus journey. He was going from His disciples in the Upper Room to His brothers according to the flesh. He was restless and His soul trembled for what lay ahead of Him. He knew that troops were assembling and advancing in His direction. It was night and He knew that time does not take away the sin and guilt of the world. The coming events weighed on His mind as He contemplated the next twenty-four hours. The Promised Land lay ahead, but the sins of the world and the ever-increasing burden of guilt prevented *us* from entering Paradise. This bore down heavily on the heart and soul of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God.

He, like Jacob, sought solitude. Maybe that would give Him a few minutes of quiet communion with His Father. He crossed the stream called Kidron as His soul continued to seek the peaceful rest that so eluded Him on the night of His betrayal. Now, in the Garden of Gethsemane, with the disciples slumbering a stone's throw away, Jesus was disquited. You see, your sin would separate Jesus not only from His disciples, not only from His family, not only from the Promised Land, but also from His Father's gracious presence. That night, too, was black and except for the unholy trinity of sin, death, and the devil, and perhaps the sound of a hooting owl somewhere in the distance, the Incarnate Son of God was alone.

But not for long. He pleaded with God: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39). The Scriptures record no answer to His prayer. The struggle continued as the petition was repeated and the plea uttered a second and third time. Throughout that dark and doleful night and the mid-day darkness that followed on Good Friday, there was pain and suffering – instant pain of body, soul, and spirit. He was crucified and the Lord of Heaven contended with the Lord God His Father. Though taunted to come down from the cross, He remained, bearing the burden of your sin, and not yours only, but the sins of the whole world. He allowed Himself to be pinned down in the Divine wrestling match. But He would not release His hold on the cross until He had God's blessing . . . for you. Beloved, this is Jesus, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2), finally crying out from that cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" That is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me" (Matthew 27:46)?

Why did the Lord God engage in this wrestling match? What joy was there that caused Jesus to endure suffering for the iniquity of us all? There are at least four reasons for this: first, that the sins of the world could be forgiven; second, that everyone's guilt could be taken away; third, so that servile fear could be replaced by godly fear; and fourth,



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so those who believe in Him would be able to hear His invitation into the Promised Land: “Well done, good and faithful servant; Enter into the joy of your Master.” (Matthew 25:23)

3. The Third Person

Now we come to that third person I mentioned earlier. The first was Jacob. The second was Jesus. Who is the third? It could be Job. Having had his soul wrung with grief and his body fully tattooed with hideous sores, Job wrestled with God. It could be that Canaanite woman. She came to Jesus requesting help for her demon-possessed daughter, only to be told that He had been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and that “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Matt. 15:25).

But, no, it’s not Job or the Canaanite woman. It’s you. You, too, are on an exodus journey, going out from this fallen world to the Paradise of God. You live in a land where there are temptations into which you have fallen time and time again. Maybe it’s pride that keeps you from acknowledging sins committed so long ago, sins for which you have yet to repent, sins that still keep you awake in the darkness. Maybe it’s servile fear that haunts you in the middle of the night. You’re alone as you wrestle with your past, with your accusing conscience, with that ever-increasing load of guilt.

At such times you are alone, but not for long. The One who is present everywhere, arrives on the scene. And as you contend with almighty God, He permits you to wrestle with Him throughout the darkness of this world’s night. During your sojourn and time of trial, He may reach out His finger and touch your heart or your home or a loved one, inflicting instant and continuous pain. You hobble around and, in spite of the hurt and suffering, with strength and perseverance that can only come from above, you are determined not to release your hold on God until You have His blessing.

It’s amazing, isn’t it? To wrestle with God and prevail!

“The wages of sin is death.”

“Yes Lord, but the Gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“The soul that sins shall die.”

“Yes Lord, but Christ was wounded for our transgressions.”

“There is no one who does good; not even one.”

“Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Dear Lord God, You permit me to wrestle with You *and You give me the strength to do so!* Therefore, I will not let go of You until I hear Your Word of blessing.”

Why does the Lord God engage in such wrestling matches with us? Why does He inflict or permit a variety of painful injuries, horrid diseases, heart-rending tragedies, and awful events that might dog you for the rest of your life? Once again, there are at least four reasons for this: first, that your sin may be forgiven, and in Christ it is; second, that your guilt may be taken away, and in Christ it is; third, that your servile fear may be replaced by godly fear, and in Christ it is; and fourth, so that you are enabled to limp your way along



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and be ushered into the Promised Land and, in Christ, that is happening even now!

He accomplishes this by providing you with His Word and Sacraments, through which He not only brings you *into* the Israel of God, but *sustains* you in His Church. Recall your Baptism by which He daily drowns the old sinful nature in you. Declare to yourself and the Old Evil Foe: "I am baptized! And, if I am baptized, I belong to Christ." Remember that you are both sinner and saint, and that God, in His Word of Law, accuses you, but in His Gospel, for the sake of Jesus, He forgives you. Pay attention each time the Absolution is pronounced and take it to heart. Receive, as often as you can, the Body and Blood of the Incarnate Son of God, given and shed for the forgiveness of your sin and the strengthening of your faith. Wrestle with God through His Word and Sacraments, by which the Holy Spirit gives you strength to endure whatever the Lord may permit to come into your life, and never let go. "Remain faithful unto death and He will give you the crown of Life" (Revelation 2:10).

But, beloved, remember, most of all, that He wrestles with you, not as an enemy, but as a sparring partner, that He may strengthen you in your journey, that you may learn to depend on His strength and not your own, and that, as you hold on to Him, He is holding on to you, and He will not let you go until He blesses you with life everlasting. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen